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IDENTITY, CHANCE AND INCREDULITY OF POSTMODERN METAFICTIONIN PAUL AUSTER'S CITY OF GLASS

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Abstract

Paul Auster's contribution to the postmodern novel is praiseworthy due to inclusion of various elements such as intertextuality, plurality, uncertainty and themes of chance, identity and existence versus essence. In *City of Glass*, Auster started a sequence of events by chance in New York City by foregrounding the concepts of place, labyrinth, self, and public. He proposed that one's identity depends on the role he/she takes and such multidimensional identity might be chosen by chance. Quinn, the Protagonist of the novel, is a writer who writes under pseudonym of William Wilson, but enters a story as a detective using another name and takes another identity. Fictional names and events in the novel emphasize that as Lyotard proposed credulity of narratives and identities are challenged. In addition, at the beginning, Quinn enters the events by chance, but reacts to events intellectually and rationally which in turn suggests that in postmodern literature individuals react to chance, uncertainty, and plural identity, though it is aimless. Language game and arbitrary language are equivalent with transparency of glass in *The City of Glass* that targets indistinguishable identities as indications of aimless postmodern search of unity and centrality.

Introduction

Paul Auster (1947-) is a prototype of postmodern and mystery writers whose contribution to American literature and philosophy is considerable. Auster's education in literature, his philosophical stands close to French's postmodern philosophers, and translation of French literature distinguishes him as a writer with a labyrinth of ideas meshed in his novels especially that of *City of Glass* (1985), the

first part of *The New York Trilogy*. In Auster's fiction, the element of chance plays a significant role in specifying the fate of characters, in other words the life of destitute characters is overwhelmed by chance. In addition, the existence of a myriad of implied characters in Auster's postmodern metafiction contribute to the story that it is difficult to distinguish them and signify each with specific identity.

According to Hutcheon (2003), metafiction is a fiction about fiction, i.e., a theory of fiction possesses a commentary on its own linguistic or narrative identity. This theory focuses on determining the importance of narcissistic narrative and critical self-awareness for the novel structure and self-mirroring (p. 38). Metafiction mainly focuses on two aspects: (1) linguistic and narrative structures, and (2) the role of the reader. In the first case, the basic structuralist terminology of the "code," the sign's "signifier" and "signified," and of the "referent" of language proved useful and indeed necessary. The notion of identity can be observed in Paul Auster's works where he tracks multiple identities in characters via reviewing their memories or creating mutual relationships among the selves. It is on the part of the reader to approach different aspects of identity with respect to language, literary structures, and relationships between the characters. The present study aims to explore instances of identity under a metafiction-oriented reading of Auster's works and highlights the criteria of self and identity in an attempt to overcome the traditional oppressive limits and present a metafictional-oriented reading within postmodern setting.

In Auster's novels, the identities of the characters – whether protagonists, antagonists and foils – are finally captured by the reader. In postmodern acceptance as well as in "less postmodern approaches (e.g., social identity theory), identity in a dynamic context is a construct that can be discovered through dialogues in the text. Readers as the dynamic perceivers can attribute meaningfulness to the text and interpret it based on their own personal experiences, rules, and identity standard defined in their minds (Stets, 2009, p.31).

In this article, primarily the concept of 'chance' is discussed *The City of Glass* since it represents one's decision in life based on chance and projects possibilities that readers might experience. In doing so, the word 'chance' denotes 'random,' 'casual,' 'desultory,' 'contingent,' 'luck,' and many other associated words. According to Landsman and van Wolde (2016) "the use of such words as chance, coincidence, luck, fortune or randomness strongly overlap" (p. 9). 'Chance' also designates 'unpredictability,' 'haphazardness,' or even 'risk'. According to Barban (2016), chance "is an event that has no cause nor finality; it may even involve abstract concepts such as fate, destiny or luck, including a nuance of risk and opportunity; and finally it is used as a synonym for words like randomness, contingency and accident" (p. 6).

At its most extreme, the concept of chance is made manifest through the making of personal identity, clearly understood by Auster as a constantly changing entity. The ever-making of identity is made evident in Auster's *Trilogy* in which the characters

often move within detective stories because their own existences are a mystery: nothing is what it seems and nothing else is as absurd as their own identities. In this investigation, a possible model for a relationship between chance and identity is drawn, one that does not rest on man's tendencies or even past. In *City of Glass*, Auster tries to tell us that identities are shakable because a small change is enough for a character to embrace a new path, a new life and a new identity. Chance symbolizes the nature of the labyrinth of the world, of the nature of existence in human society. And in that society, the characters are robbed of their lives, freedom of thought, action and the right to decide their future. Because of that, they are like puppets that have been pulled by life. Brendan Martin (2007) believes that "while chance may determine an individual's subsequent existence, the ways in which each individual reacts can be rationalized" (p. 35).

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924-1998) disdains credulity of grand-narratives and believes in credibility of small narratives so that no such narrative is privileged over the other narratives. Lyotard (1979) defines postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives" and maintains "our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies" (p. xxv). Lyotard (1979) explains that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity" (p. 7). It implies that narrative knowledge differs from scientific knowledge which endorses uncertain aspect of narrative knowledge, but it is the point of flux shifting from one writer to another. In addition, James Smith (2001) argued that there are misunderstandings in reading biblical metanarratives based on Lyotard's definition and clarifies that in Lyotard's perspective metanarratives are "stories which not only tell a grand story (since even premodern and tribal stories do this), but also claim to be able to legitimate the story and its claims by an appeal to universal Reason" (p. 354). Accordingly, no specific ideological boundary is defined by Lyotard to include or exclude a specific narrative. Here, the postulate of identity in flux and the role of chance as a pivotal element of life are elucidated in *City of Glass* since the study relies on Lyotard's idea of incredulity of metanarratives.

Furthermore, regarding postmodernism in fiction it is to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its reflection of the texts and contexts of the history. To distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, the label "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon, 2003, p. 5) is used. Likewise, "it stands in relation to any other text in the lack of which it can be registered neither in the consciousness nor in the realm of signification" (Taghizadeh and Ebrahimi, 2015, p. 1913). This study concerns the subject of chance and uncertainty as influential aspects in identity formation of characters in *City of Glass* which are substantiated by textual indication of the novel to show if chance operates in the story or controlled and managed by rationality.

Discussion

Most postmodern novels are plotless and it is difficult to put a short plot summary of the novel. Paul Auster's narrative is both simple and complicated; because he

develops his novels in form of a labyrinth, that one cannot provide a scheme for the novel. In *City of Glass*, Daniel Quinn is a writer who has quitted writing due to the personal dilemma of losing his son and wife. Quinn stops his normal life after the accident that led to death of his wife and son. For Quinn, a flip is enough to overturn one's life and identity; he had enough reason to be anyone else. He was a poet, and now he is a detective. Quinn, therefore, hides his identity behind a false one, behind the character of investigator. This new identity is made by chance after receiving a phone call, turning him into an imaginary private detective named Paul Auster.

He is writing using the pseudonym of William Wilson whose narrator is Max Work. Quinn, the main character of the novel pretends he is Paul Auster, a detective who the man on the telephone call inquires to protect him against his father. When Quinn meets Peter Stillman, he finds him a young man whose linguist father exploits him when he was a child to administer his language experiment on his newborn son till the end of puberty, but the result has been his son's inability to acquire language naturally. A continuum of events occurs because of starting the carrier by chance. The first sentence of the novel revealing the role of chance indicated,

It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not. Much later, when he was able to think about the things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. (Auster, 2006, p.3)

The story is triggered by chance and the initial decision of Quinn is to take a private detective role by changing his identity. It is the first complexion of identity in which a detective writer is interested in playing the role of a real detective by a denial or repressive mechanism to escape his own real identity. Though the initial page of the novel implies that the reader deals with a realist novel, the narrative line of the story questions the identity of the real narrator and the detective, suggesting that their identities are in the state of flux.

The selection of elements and activities congruent with the postmodern genre as manifested in terms the New York City along with the plurality of identities represent that like labyrinth of the New York City, the identities are instable. Martin (2007) claims "Auster's conception of chance confirms his status as a self-consciously postmodern author. New York City serves as a backdrop to many of Auster's writings, and Auster evokes the postmodern notion of urban dislocation in order to compliment his fictional narratives" (p. ix). The name of the novel, *City of Glass*, contributes to the concept of uncertainty as an element of postmodern fiction and represents characteristics of glass as an entity that can be transparent and translucent. In an imaginary city made of glass, everything can be seen easily and nothing can be discerned since everything is shapeless. Identities in the novel are similar to glass entities that are indistinguishable from each other as manifested in Quinn's decision to be detective. Odacıoğlu and Çoban Odacıoğlu (2017) tried to "resolve a case which, however, results in uncertainties, madness, exhaustion,

identity crisis, silence and disappearance” which results in “breakdown of the relationship between ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’” (p.485).

When Quinn follows Peter Stillman's father in the train station, he cannot distinguish his father from another man and follows one of them by chance,

As Stillman reached the threshold of the station, he put his bag down once again and paused. At that moment Quinn allowed himself a glance to Stillman's right, surveying the rest of the crowd to be doubly sure he had made no mistakes. What happened then defied explanation. Directly behind Stillman, heaving into view just inches behind his right shoulder, another man stopped, took a lighter out of his pocket, and lit a cigarette. His face was the exact twin of Stillman's. (Auster, 2006, p. 55)

In this condition, once more Quinn decides by chance. This time he is responsible for the life of Peter Stillman and is committed to his appointment, but when he is uncertain in discerning the real man he resorts to what chance inquires and indicates when there is no definite decision, there is no opportunity except relying on chance.

There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made—and he had to make a choice—would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end. At that moment, the two Stillmans started on their way again. (Auster, 2006, p. 56)

Quinn follows the second man who goes to the left. The question is that if the man is not Peter's father, then what happens to him and how the story can go on. Though later it becomes clear that he has selected the right decision, but at the beginning, decision by chance is risky. Therefore, the meaning of commitment and subjugation to their agreement is questioned which suggests chance is unescapable. Harold Bloom (2004) believed that "there is meaning in the world, but this meaning is only suggested, never clearly expressed. Therefore, everything in Paul Auster's work occurs by chance; and what better image of chance than an inheritance—an event as harmful as it is beneficial" (p. 45). In effect, Auster indicated that when everything can be unclear and uncertain, how one can claim he is right. Likewise, Toni Rudat (2006) indicated, “identity has become as uncertain as everything else, since it depends on the way it is represented” (p. 4). The argument on Auster's strategy to show identity is pluralistic concept in postmodernist novel suggests that metanarratives that regard identity stable are challenged and endorses the incredulity of metanarratives as theorized by Lyotard.

Uncertainty in the novel is related to Auster's metafictional writing strategies. He refers to some works of literature the name of his characters are taken from. For example, Quinn reads Marco Polo travels and uses a pseudonym as William Wilson that is the name of a short story by Edger Allen Poe. The use of intertextuality and the fictional world in the novel implies that the novel is a fictional narrative in which Quinn's decision and Stillman's behavior are sorts of fictional life. In fact, the emergence of fictional characters suggests that there is an unstable boundary between one's identity and myriad of choices to be selected. It can be justified when

Quinn tries to be detective and though he knows his own real identity, his clients know him as detective Auster. Accordingly, one's identity can be the projection of what one tries to be, not what he really is, because the identity known in community is the identity that is living; this identity in flux is right in case of Guinn.

In addition to identity, Auster is preoccupied by language and its role in metafiction and uncertainty. The reference to Milton's *Paradise Lost* contributes to the narrative line of the story. When father Stillman walks through the streets of New York, his crisscross path is drawn by Quinn which finally can be read as "The Tower of Babel" and refers to Stillman's obsession with language and the origin of languages. Stillman tries to reconstruct the language of God that is discussed in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. When Stillman wanders in the streets, he reports the names of each entity in his notebook because he tries to write a language common to the entire people or a language that its words present the entities without directly like prelapsarian language. The uncertainty in the novel opposes determination in it and Stillman's naming of objects. He claims that no arbitrary relationship exists between the names and things.

"What do you do with these things?"

"I give them names."

"Names?"

"I invent new words that will correspond to the things."

"Ah. Now I see. But how do you decide? How do you know if you've found the right word?"

"I never make a mistake. It's a function of my genius."

"Could you give me an example?"

"Of one of my words?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but that won't be possible. It's my secret, you understand. Once I've published my book, you and the rest of the world will know. But for now I have to keep it to myself."

"Classified information."

"That's right. Top secret." (Auster, 2006, p. 77)

Reconstructing a unique language common among human beings implies determinism, a condition conversation is no more possible, this logocentric world reconstructs the prelapsarian language before the fall of man. Stillman's claim for revitalization of prelapsarian language resembles the philosophical idea of prevalence of essence to existence. By inventing "new words that will correspond to the things," (Auster, 2006, p.77) Stillman searches for essence while Peter Stillman who has taken different names and has been deprived of freedom seeks free will. It is revealed that by birth Peter has been isolated from human being by his father to be a case of language test and investigation for the origin of language. Peter learns language after puberty age and he is unable to perform language rhetorically and correctly. Since he cannot express his competence he thinks he is unable to

communicate his free will. "My mind is not all it should be. I say this of my own free will. But I will try. Yes and no. I will try to tell you, even if my mind makes it hard" (Auster, 2006, p. 16). The simple structure of the terms shows that Peter Stillman has developed language even after his father's experiment and indicates that language is dialectical and instrument of communicative. Therefore, Peter's father as a linguist aimlessly tried to write a language that words correspond the things, because like what discussed in identity and plurality of identities there is breakdown between signifier and signified.

In addition to the novel's postmodern content, the existential ideology that is explored is questioned by Auster since he is not able to describe the relationship between signified and signifier. Likewise, Pormouzeh and Nilchian (2019) argued that "in Sartre's view Man's "free will" and choices are the bases of existentialism which causes pain, due to the centrality of human being and his responsibility about self and society, holding all these responsibilities requires intelligence, tolerance and activity that means total transition of responsibility from God to Man" (p. 26). Therefore, Stillman's father seeks the God or essence while his son looks for free will and represents a prototype of postmodern character because does not represents the rightness of his father's theory about language and condition of human beings as representation of essence. In fact, essence and prelapsarian condition are equivalent, while nature of language and one's identity represent can be viewed in flux and multiplicity.

One element of Auster's postmodernist novel is intertextuality that contributes to the metafictional aspect of metanarratives. In turn, intertextuality assures uncertainty in the novel since includes characters in the fiction and contributes to the element of chance that is similar to the condition of language as signified and signifier. The novel is constructed based on intertextuality rather than connection with reality,

Quinn knew almost nothing about crime. ... he had learned from books, films, and newspapers. He did not, however, consider this to be a handicap. What interested him about the stories he wrote was not their relation to the world but their relation to other stories. (Auster, 2006, p. 7)

Bernstein (2011) indicated that the novel is constructed through intertextuality and "psychologically Auster foregrounds intertextuality as a determinant of existence and experience" (p. 135). Existence through intertextuality is the result of Quinn's life, a condition of personal dilemma in which he escaped and started experience of existence by confining to the other texts. Accordingly, the author is lost in struggling with different identities and the environment multiplies his frustration. Furthermore, the labyrinth of New York and aimless wandering in the city is a metaphor for hollowness inside the main character and his identity.

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. (Auster, 2006, p. 4)

The labyrinth is a place that when one enters, he/she cannot exit and has to select his destination by chance. The protagonist of the novel is caught in a labyrinth of a detective case and similarly follows his case in the Streets of New York that is referred to as labyrinth which implies the protagonist is lost. The sensation of being lost and decision by chance suggests the hollowness of one's inside and soul.

When Quinn tries to be a private detective, he ignores his previous life by repressing the painful memories. Pearson (2008) indicated, "Quinn yearns to remove himself from his past, he meanders through the endless streets of New York. He feels lost and disconnected. His goal is to escape his mind completely, to eradicate all thoughts and perhaps all memories" (p. 1); therefore, he seeks "to be nowhere" (Auster, 2006, p. 4). Accordingly, Quinn wishes to dissociate himself from his own identity. Similarly, Yuan Henan (2020) indicated, the protagonist Daniel Quinn, has no idea about who he truly is and feels confused about his own identity after losing his intimate family members—his wife and son. Quinn takes on a series of identities, such as William Wilson, Max Work, Henry Dark, Peter Stillman, and so on, to resolve the identity crisis he is faced with, attempting to get rid of his miserable memories. However, he still cannot tell who he is, failing to decipher his own true identity. (249)

Though the concept of labyrinth referred was conceived as identity confusion and crisis, in Paul Auster's fiction, trapping in labyrinth and attempts to get out of dilemma acquires a different meaning as a metaphor of escaping from chaotic, violent and corrupted reality and a search for both personal and cultural identity which can be achieved through intertextuality. Auster's works at times have been labelled historiographic for he intertwines the lives of his writer characters and the literary texts, which they create, with the cultural texts of myth and history. The historical trace in the text, known as historiographic metafiction is understood in the sense attributed to it in the now classic definition by Hutcheon (2003), who pointed out "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" that means "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (p. 5). Similarly, Taghizadeh and Ebrahimi (2015) indicated through "techniques like parody, paratextuality, and historical re-conceptualization" Auster used "history as a space of discursiveness, and in order to challenge the authenticity of objective facts and violate the boundary lines of fiction and reality" (p. 1914).

As discussed, in *City of Glass*, the setting of the novel and occupation of characters represent and construct the identity of the characters by searching for personal and cultural identity. Quinn for example, when escapes from his own self, seeks representation of his self as another person, though unreal or fictional in society and among people. Boettcher (2013) believes that there is such imploring cultural identity when "Daniel Quinn moves from the domestic space to the public streets of Manhattan" (p. 220). It shows that Quinn selects society and contribution with people to be identified as a detective than being isolated in his self and individuality as a broken person. However, his strategy for getting into new identity is based on chance, not a purposeful decision, meantime when he caught in struggle for

understanding his identity; he is obliged to be the detective he pretends, not his real identity.

In addition, the narrative line of the novel and changing roles by Quinn approve his flexibility in taking the function of different characters and identities. When he confronts Stillman's father, he introduces himself as a different person. First, he introduces himself with real name of Daniel Quinn rather than detective Paul Auster. Martin (2007) states that "Quinn has already compromised his sense of identity, and immerses himself in the role of Auster to the extent that he begins to lose his grip on reality" (p. 1). Second, he introduces himself as Henry Dark, the man that is attributed to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Quinn does it intentionally since he tries to tell the name that might be familiar to Stillman. For the third time he introduces himself as Peter Stillman to see if he is conscious of having a son with the same name. Therefore, when Quinn introduces himself with different identities he tries to measure Stillman's consciousness and contradiction ability. When Quinn adopts the name of Auster he tries to solve mysteries and solve the enigma,

The fact that there was now a purpose to his being Paul Auster—a purpose that was becoming more and more important to him—served as a kind of moral justification for the charade and absolved him of having to defend his lie. For imagining himself as Auster had become synonymous in his mind with doing good in the world. (Auster, 2006, p. 51)

Quinn tries to hide his real personality and when he is anonymous, he can behave as he wishes. Hiding behind the mask of others' identity and trying to be no one and nowhere is inferred by Alford (1995) as "desire to lose his self in the streets of Manhattan—all point to a figure who suffers from a genuine misunderstanding of his place in the world, of the space that he occupies, one that is neither here nor there" (p. 631). Like Auster's *The Music of Chance* the protagonist of the novel is an aimless person who leads his life by chance and reacts to the events when it is required. Alford (1995) indicated, "becoming an aimless pedestrian has internal as well as external consequences. Through walking, Quinn leaves "home," both his apartment and his sense of self. But as he indicated, he is somewhere: "nowhere," a nowhere of "his" construction" (p. 615). Since the novel is open to discussion and no conclusion can be drawn for the fate of Peter Stillman and the death of his father, it is impossible to solve the causes of events.

In addition, the protagonist enters the story as chance requires and tries to go on by deciding the right path and taking intellectual choice. The reaction of the protagonist to actions he encounters represents the existential intention in the life of the protagonist despite his behavior as an aimless character. Ahmadgoli and Hassan (2020) in the study of postmodern uncertainty and chance in *The Music of Chance* indicated that Auster deals with "existential philosophy and incredulity of narratives, because chance as a developing and dynamic phenomenon in the novel causes logical reactions of the protagonist who loosens the boundaries of the underlying concepts such as random, chance and responsibility" (p. 808). While

Quinn decides to be detective under another identity by chance, but he cannot rely on chance as determining factor when he confronts situations that might choose one specific decision. It indicates that he resorts to reason and logical decisions when necessary, unless he lets affairs to proceed by chance.

City of Glass reflects Lyotard's (1979) idea as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. 38), because different narratives are possible due to the nature of language as an arbitrary phenomenon. Accordingly, incredulity toward identity is legitimated when one's identity can be shaped independent of one's own physical being depending on conditions and even chance. In addition, the relying on the concept of labyrinth as manifested by the idea of streets of New York indicates that it is possible to be lost by chance, but one can find his/her way using intelligence and rationality.

Conclusion

In *City of Glass* nothing happens and it is difficult to believe in identities, narratives and the story. "He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing" (Auster, 2006, p. 159). In the novel, the protagonist plays the role of different people and at the same time intended to escape from his own personality. Incredulity in metafiction and metanarrative is a prevalent feature of postmodern literature that in Auster's *City of Glass* refers to different identities of Quinn as author, detective and narrator. In this article, chance and identity were discussed as correlated subjects so that when the basis of a decision is chance and fate no stable identity can be determined. In the novel it was revealed that Quinn enters a project by chance or a wrong telephone call, but he cannot leave responsibility by chance. Quinn has to resort to rational decision making when he solves the puzzles he confronts as detective and chance does not work anymore. Quinn becomes a detective and follows his case in the labyrinth of New York city, a decision made by chance but used his intellectual capacity to play the role of a detective to solve the enigma.

The concept of historiographic metafiction was discussed in the study and it was discussed that Auster challenges the authenticity of objective facts by representing history in fiction so that it implies history is one narrative while several narratives are possible and their credulity is assured by resorting to arbitrariness nature of language and breakdown of direct relationship between signifier and signified. Intertextuality and using fictional characters within the fiction and using documents in the fiction "undermines the conventional tradition of fiction writing" (Taghizadeh and Ebrahimi, 2015, p. 1913), to imply incredulity of history and even fiction as metanarratives and products of one's own perspective.

As Lyotard discussed about incredulity of narratives, it is difficult to believe in the narratives in *City of Glass*. In a city that everything is the same like a transparent glass and everything is similar the other it is impossible to decide which way should be taken. Characters such as Henry Dark and William Wilson are fictional and activities in the novel are fictionalized. The real writer is an assumed detective that Quinn claims he is the same person. Such complication and duality of identities in

the novel emphasizes Martin's (2007) idea indicating that "in Auster's New York City, individuals are reflected and duplicated. This degree of duality ensures that identity is fractured, unstable, and easily discarded" (p. 104). The events are triggered by chance and developed by chance, but the outcome was not determined by chance, because the protagonist uses rational thinking to solve the problems and to discover relationship between events such as game of language and intertextuality in the novel.

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